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FOR FAITH AND ACTION

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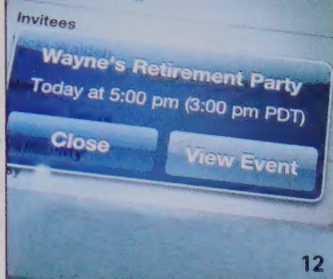
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# TAKE HEART

VOLUME 24 NUMBER 10 DECEMBER 2011

In the Bible it seems that angels—messengers of God—are frequently telling us not to be afraid. What do they know that we don't?

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VOICES

## Take Heart

by Kate Sprutta Elliott

At this time of year, the days grow shorter and colder. We find ourselves in Advent, a time of reflection and preparation. I feel the need for quiet prayer and solitude, but that puts me out of step with the rest of the culture. The world around us starts gearing up for Christmas right after Halloween. The ads on TV encourage us to buy, buy, buy. Commercials show us images of parties and festive get-togethers with great food and beautiful people. We might feel like losers if our party invitations are scarce or if we are not busy. What's wrong with me if I don't feel sparkly and fun? What if I just want to sit with my thoughts?

If that's how you find yourself feeling, I say to you: Take heart. We all need solitude now and then, as Christa von Zychlin tells us in "A Place Apart." She reminds us "what a comfort it is for those of us with some introvert characteristics to observe that Jesus was a person who also needed his time alone. All four of the gospels note his habit of retreating from the public eye..."

One of the best pieces of advice I've heard over the years is to be a friend to yourself—and that holds true whether you find yourself feeling too much alone or overwhelmed. Robert Wyatt writes in "Be a Friend to Yourself" that "By becoming a friend to myself, I learned to look at myself through what I trust are God's eyes. God's eyes, to be sure, can be the eyes of judgment—the eyes of the commandments. But God's eyes are also the eyes of mercy and love..."

It's with the eyes of mercy and love that a group of volunteers in Bellingham, Wash., serves those who are at life's final doorway. In "At the Threshold" by Aaron Cooper, we learn about the Threshold choir, an organization of singers who bring the gift of music to those who are dying. "At the bedside of a client—often at the local Whatcom Hospice House, a group care home, or the client's own residence—a small group of singers sits in a circle around the person... (and) sings very quietly. [The former director] Linda said, 'We allow lots of space for silence between songs. If there are family members or caregivers there, we also offer this gift to them.'"

Speaking of gifts, in "Acting on the Gospel Call," Audrey Novak Riley reminds us of the ELCA World Hunger fund and programs. She writes, "When you get involved with ELCA World Hunger, whether by volunteering to serve, sending a donation, or helping people learn about hunger in our world today, you make a difference in someone's life."

Finally, on a practical note about gifts, read Else Schardt's "Ten Trendy Tips for Grandmas." She asks, "How can we deal wisely with the many inter-generational stresses that beset us around holiday times?" She shares her favorite tips with us—good reminders at any time of year.

The *Gather* staff wishes you a blessed Advent and Christmas. 🌿

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GIVE US THIS DAY

## Do Not Be Afraid

by Terri Mork Speirs

### Nick was a floor layer.

Brandy was a housekeeper. Beau, a copper scrapper. Tasha, a grocery clerk. Andy, a factory worker. The other Tasha, a nursing mother. Shanta was six months pregnant. They were some of my students in the Thursday evening Composition I class at the Des Moines Area Community College. In addition to taking courses, most of my students were raising kids and working day jobs. (Like me.) I loved them because they were my first batch of students and they were not afraid to step outside their boundaries to learn something new, with a teacher who was doing the same.

We gathered for three hours once a week in the computer lab, September to December. We were forging our second chances. They, an associate of arts degree. Me, a new identity as emerging writer and teacher after 20 years in the non-profit sector.

My students drove up to 40 miles to get to class and often didn't eat supper on the way, many of them coming straight from their workplace. The least I could do was supply the candy. Before each class I scattered a rainbow of individually wrapped treats across the common table where we sat.

We would all settle around the sweets and explore the gray soot of *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy, the novel-made-movie about a man and his 10-year-old son in search of food, in hiding from cannibals, and "carrying the fire" in a post-apocalyptic world. The reader is never told what it means to "carry the fire" but

the prose stirs big thinking on how to love in the face of horrific uncertainty.

My students crossed the boundaries of their so-called working-class status and wrote papers on character, setting, style, and theme. They explored the parent and child relationship, the burned-out landscape and McCarthy's sparse punctuation. They wrestled questions like: How does one maintain humanity when everything seems inhuman?

The Bible study session for this month reminds us that Jesus always favors the outsiders. During Advent we remember a supreme outsider, a poster-child outsider, if you will—a young girl named Mary who was told not to be afraid even as she was called to step outside her boundaries in a big and dangerous way. She prepared to bear the gift of Christmas. We prepare to receive it. And what is the gift? Strength through vulnerability, divinity through humanity, power through weakness.

That's what Beau, Brandy, Nick, the Tashas, and my other students offered me. They, in all their humanness, demonstrated that yes, I could teach. I could do this new thing I had only vaguely imagined. My students were the ones who, in essence, delivered the message: Be not afraid, we will cross boundaries together. And we did. 🌸

**Terri Mork Speirs** is a grateful recipient of the Women of the ELCA's Cronk Memorial academic scholarship. She contributed to the recently released anthology, *Keeping the Faith in Seminary*, edited by Ellen Roscher. Terri's Web site is [thesnakecharmerswife.com](http://thesnakecharmerswife.com).



# GRANDMAS

## TEN TRENDY TIPS FOR

by Else Schardt



“Hello?” “Hello, Mom!” “Hi. How are you all?” “Oh, we’re doing well. How about you?” “Dad and I are doing fine. And we’re very excited about Christmas, looking forward to your coming.” “Mom, that’s what I called about. We have decided to start some of our own family Christmas traditions right here with the children.” “Oh, but you always come here for Christmas! That’s our family tradition.”



Yes, I know, but this year we would like to hang out here at home instead."

What would you say next if this were a conversation between you—the grandma—and your adult child?

Christmas and other holidays bring out wonderful joys and memories. At the same time holidays can bring out unresolved disagreements and resentments within families. Some of these stem from our own childhood, while others might stem from our fears of letting go of our adult children. How can we deal wisely with the many inter-generational stresses that beset us around holiday times?

From your own rich experiences you doubtless have a wealth of advice *for* grandmas and *about* grandmas! Today I invite you to consider and enjoy 10 of my favorite tips—advice which I have learned both from experience and from my children and their families and friends.

**ONE > BE OPEN TO NEW IDEAS ABOUT HOLIDAYS AND SPECIAL DAYS.** Develop a healthy and mature attitude about such holidays as Christmas, Mother's Day, and national holidays. You raised your children to become responsible parents; now you are invited to respect their family wishes, even if you are not included. Instead, be a surrogate grandma to a neighbor's family or a single mom and her kids or visit elderly lonesome people on such days and brighten up their lives.

When your family comes to visit next time or you go to visit them, take time to remember, and tell your grandchildren about your own favorite holidays or festivals. If you kept a journal or diary while growing up, read an excerpt from it, and bring out an album or scrapbook from long ago, especially if it has pictures of programs from times when their mommy or daddy was little, and you will have a captive audience.

**TWO > EVALUATE YOUR GIFT-GIVING IN WHOLESOME AND CREATIVE WAYS.** Competitiveness among grandparents

can lead to resentment, and grandchildren soon learn which grandparent indulges their wishes the most. My husband and I have started education funds for our grandchildren, and we contribute to these on their birthdays. Then we give only small gifts at birthdays and Christmas, or we wait and give a surprise gift when we visit.

Give by your presence at critical times, if invited. In a growing family, a grandparent can be a stabilizing presence in many ways. For example, at times the middle child needs extra hugs, and at other times the oldest needs a listening, non-judgmental, confidential ear. Often, the youngest might get too much attention.

Other special gifts can include post cards and real letters in the mail, short e-mail messages, and phone calls at suitable times.

A huge gift is to schedule one-on-one time with each grandchild, especially to listen, to converse meaningfully, and to love each one unconditionally. Affirm the children's positive perceptions and emotions about their lives and recognize the negative ones. Share honestly with the child about your own emotional turmoil of childhood.

**THREE > READ AND CELEBRATE CHILD-RAISING BOOKS YOUR CHILDREN ARE READING.** First, learn from books about boundaries. They can give us a new respect for our adult children's dealings with boundaries in their own childhood when we were responsible! Are we willing to let go and celebrate the fact that we are not the parents of our children's little ones?

Second, gain wisdom about dealing with the strong-willed child. These insights can lead to wonderful discussions between grandparents and their grown children. I am amazed and thankful to note how wisely and calmly our children deal with their strong-willed children, despite the challenges.

Third, respect safety rules. For example, medical research about having children sleep on their backs



rather than on their tummies needs to be honored (even if I secretly wonder if I could have raised my kids sleeping on their backs). Another safety issue nowadays concerns physical punishment, which has long ago been replaced by such disciplinary notions as natural consequences and withdrawal of certain privileges. This is a vital safety issue for children, and grandparents who still want to give physical punishment face the consequences of the law as well as the bewilderment and hurt of their grandchildren and alienation from their children.

**FOUR > FOLLOW THE RULES OF THE PARENTS.** Follow the food-eating and bed-going rules of the parents whenever possible. Don't spoil them with candy. Instead, spoil them with foods and activities that are healthy for them. Don't become a wedge between your grandchildren and their parents. If they ask permission for something, and their parents are there, say, "If it's OK with your mommy/daddy, then yes, let's do it."

"Mommy, I would like Grandma cheese on my bread," said my granddaughter one day when we were visiting our daughter and her family.

"Grandma cheese? What on earth is that?" I asked my daughter suspiciously.

"Oh, the kids call this Grandma cheese because you bought it for them last time you were here, and now it's their favorite kind of cheese."

Well, they surely could do worse with a favorite food choice! But am I going to be remembered by my grandchildren with cheese?

**FIVE > PRACTICE THE MINISTRY OF SHUTTING UP.** Theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his book, *Life Together*, reminds his readers in the fourth chapter about "The Ministry of Holding One's Tongue." Our children are now adults and parents themselves; it is their turn to blossom as parents and to make the rules and set the boundaries. Be delighted if they ask for advice, but practice the

ministry of shutting up if advice is not sought. This is a hard tip for me to follow, since I tend to think I have great advice, whether someone is asking for it or not! When parents discipline their children, don't judge the situation or jump in. You may not know the full story. Also, don't argue with your children in front of the grandchildren. Your task is to listen and to affirm and to love.

**SIX > LET EVERY GRANDCHILD BE YOUR FAVORITE.** Celebrate the unique characteristics, hobbies, and skills of each child to help that child feel affirmed and loved. If you secretly had a favorite among your children, be assured that everyone knows about that, so don't wonder why your adult children argue with their siblings constantly. Often this resentment continues into the next generation. Admittedly, at times one has to pay more attention to one child or another, especially when a child has special needs or is ill.

At one get-together a daughter accused me of favoring another daughter's children. I was devastated but I calmly asked her to tell me what she noticed that had hurt her. Her perception of my actions had been totally different from my own perceptions. I learned a big lesson that day and apologized, and I am daily grateful for the openness in communication with all of our children.

**SEVEN > DECIDE TOGETHER ABOUT COMMUNICATING TECHNOLOGICALLY.** Decide together with your children if and how you will communicate with your grandchildren technologically. They can hardly walk and they already know how to use a computer. What is a grandma to do? Let them teach you! Learn to play a few Wii games if they are appropriate, especially if they involve physical exercise. We need the exercise just as much as they do (just ask Dr. Oz). Have creative non-computer alternatives ready to play with them for a change. Let them teach you the rules of new games, such as card games.



and board games. It's wonderful for their developing brains as well as for your aging brain to keep activities varied and problem-solving skills in the forefront of your mind every day.

**RIGHT > CELEBRATE DIVERSITY.** Celebrate diversity in your interactions with your grandchildren by showing them that they can learn from children who are different from them. Moreover, encourage international languages and foods and cultural events and music, both at home and in the community. Affirm diversity at church and at school by watching your language about people who are different. Kids pick up our attitudes very quickly just by our gestures and jokes and the tone of our voices.

**LINE > DARE TO BRANCH OUT YOUR OWN HORIZONS.** Broaden your horizons by volunteering for service trips, soup kitchens, quilting, and global events, and by hosting international students. Take your grandchildren to assemble health kits or food packages for victims of tornadoes and hurricanes, and have them collect and buy shampoos and diapers and coloring books for families at local shelters. It's never too early to begin to build community awareness about helping others. Be the grandma who taught the grandchildren to make a difference in the world. Tell them about how young children started a penny-collecting project to alleviate hunger. And others collect money to help build schools in another country. Help sponsor "green" events as a family, and be amazing, zany recyclers together!

**EN > LIVE YOUR FAITH.** Pray daily for each grandchild and for each of their parents. This is the greatest gift you can give a grandchild. One friend told me she didn't like the woman her son chose to marry but she had a picture of her daughter-in-law on her dressing table, and every night she would pray for her. She said, "At first I didn't like her, but I grew to love her very much." Her son and daughter-in-law and five grandchildren




*The author and two of her grandchildren*

had very special relationships with this grandma over the years.

The writer of 2 Timothy 1:5 says, "I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you." Passing on the faith becomes a special, vital ministry.

Your children's and grandchildren's faith does not need to be exactly the same as yours. My husband and I have four grown children and nine grandchildren, and their involvement in their congregations enriches our own faith as we talk about our faith experiences. What a blessing to have a God who is larger than just one denomination.

Teach your grandchildren trendy hymns, and let them teach you new hymns. Be honest about your bigotry from the past and your faith struggles, for example, when you discuss suffering, natural catastrophes, and war. Also, keep open conversations with your adult children about these topics, so that they don't feel that you are getting in the way of the children's own faith discussions with their parents.

Blessings to grandparents who continue to be blessings to their precious children and grandchildren.   
**Else Schardt** and her husband served as missionaries to Papua New Guinea 1965 to 1991. They live in Dubuque, Iowa. Their books, *Surprises at the Table* and *Mission in Motion: Walking Together with God's People in Papua New Guinea*, can be ordered by emailing [schardtville@q.com](mailto:schardtville@q.com).





## FAMILY MATTERS

# The Truth of the Sacred Story

by Elyse Nelson Winger

It is 7:39 a.m. and a successful morning hinges on my ability to coax a boy up the stairs. This means that he will *not* pause to peer out the window and ponder the icy branches of the sycamore trees. Instead, he will proceed directly to the bathroom. Once there, he will *not* start up a sports-themed soliloquy in the mirror. Rather, he will promptly put toothpaste on toothbrush, make reasonable contact with teeth, descend the stairs, put on his backpack, defer cuddling the dog, and make haste for the car. School starts at 8, and we've got to be on the road by quarter 'til.

The trouble is, Daniel has just spent 20 minutes perusing a children's encyclopedia of world history over a bowl of breakfast cereal, scanning the pages about *homoerectus* and *homo sapiens*, and clean teeth don't seem urgent to him. He stands at the kitchen counter and begins: "You know Adam and Eve? I mean... not the *real* Adam and Eve, but the first people who lived on the earth?"

This is what happens when a child is raised with sacred story *and* the science of human origins: Conversations are rich and teeth do not necessarily get brushed. But that's okay. For Daniel is already intuiting that Genesis is not a scientific account, but a collection of meaningful stories about the place of humans before a mysterious, creating God. And that is a conversation I don't want to squelch, for it means that as he studies evolution, he is bringing to his reading a sacred perspective.

So...how do I keep this conversation going (after the teeth are brushed)?

How do I help him grow in faith and love of creation in a way that neither compartmentalizes nor conflates science and religion?

At the baptisms of our children, my husband, Stewart, and I promised to "place in their hands the holy Scriptures." What I didn't realize then was that this had less to do with making sure an age-appropriate translation of the Bible was handy than making sure that we were helping them read the Scriptures faithfully. And for us, that means letting the stories speak *as stories first*.

It means affirming that sacred stories indeed tell truth about our relationship to God and one another, but that this truth is not necessarily dependent upon historical evidence. It means resisting efforts to turn the Scripture into "life's little instruction book."

I love what Eugene Peterson in *Eat This Book: A Conversation on the Art of Spiritual Reading* has to say:

*"We live today in a world impoverished of story; so it is not surprising that many of us have picked up the bad habit of extracting 'truths' from the stories we read: we summarize 'principles' that we can use in a variety of settings at our discretion.... It is no wonder that we continue this abstracting, story-mutilating practice when we read our Bibles... we convert our stories into the 'serious' speech of information and motivation."*

This is not what I want for my children. Instead, I want them to live in a world enriched and challenged by story. And Advent and Christmas are marvelous for just that, for Christmastime is



ory time. It is that time of year when cozy chairs are warmed by huddled-up children and parents reading *The Gift of the Magi* and *A Christmas Carol*, when the church proclaims the stories of Elizabeth and Mary, Joseph and Zechariah, Anna and the angel Gabriel.

This season is drenched in story, and all of it has power to remind us that we are a “storied” people called to tell God’s story with our lives.

I have a lot of people to thank for teaching me to claim the power of story. But this time of year, I find myself thanking Barbara Robinson, author of *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*, for the character Imogene Herdman, her slew of siblings, and the people of First Presbyterian Church. The fictional people of Robinson’s book were the first to teach me to see the truth in the sacred stories of Jesus’ birth.

Imogene and the rest of the Herdman crew were cigar-smoking bullies who were dirty and destructive. They were poor and poorly loved. They were the kinds of kids who messed things up and ruined parties and would certainly destroy the church program. I was with the young narrator on this. And then, out of these dirty, disrespectful mouths started coming faithful questions...about Herod and the danger and more. Their questions started breaking down the script...but opening up the Scripture. And

by the night of the pageant, it was clear: This broken family broke the hold of the sentimentality that was strangling the Spirit in this church.

The young narrator reflects: “There was something special, everyone said—they couldn’t put their finger on what.” Well, even as a 10-year-old, I knew what it was: They told the truth! The Herdmans (who were still cigar-smoking bullies, by the way) actually embodied and proclaimed the truth of the story. I was definitely with the narrator on this.

From then on, the infancy narratives in the Gospels of Luke and Matthew weren’t just one-dimensional, antique accounts of Christ’s perfect birth. They were testament to the nitty-gritty world of danger and violence, fear and wonder into which Jesus was, and is still being, born. And Mary with downcast eyes and powder blue robe just didn’t fly. That’s not what God was about. Not then. Not now.

When I came home to find Daniel in stitches after having read this book aloud to his Gramma one December afternoon, I smiled. And when Catherine and I read this book together, I knew: Their response to the sacred story of Jesus’ birth was going to deepen. And while I certainly hope they don’t succumb to smoking cigars, I do hope that they will always bring honest questions to sacred stories,

as did the uncouth and un-cultured Herdmans. Their story opened up the story, and gave birth to the gospel truth within it.

I hope that my children will come to see the Bible as nothing less than sacred story that tells truth, but is not always distillable into quotable “truths” or dependent on historical proof. For example: The infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke cannot be harmonized. They are unique and beautiful stories that both speak truth about what God is doing in the world, for us, with us, and among us. And we—and our children—will miss the greater power of these stories if we insist on conflating them.

During this season, where will you find time to read and tell the stories of your life and our faith with your children and grandchildren? What great stories—in novels and movies, music and community—have power to open up the truth of the greatest story of all? What old friends in the first chapters of Luke and Matthew are waiting for a visit from you? How might this sacred season of story prime you for keeping the conversation going with your kids and grandkids? 🌿

**The Rev. Elyse Nelson Winger** is university chaplain at Illinois Wesleyan University in Bloomington, Ill. She and husband, Stewart, have two children, Catherine and Daniel, who are in the delightful elementary-school years.



A black smartphone lies on a light-colored wooden surface. The screen shows a calendar event titled "Wayne's Retirement Party" for Tuesday, September 25, 2011, from 5:00 PM to 7:00 PM. Below the title, it says "Invitees" and shows a smaller version of the event card with "Close" and "Cancel" buttons. A "slide to remove" bar is at the bottom of the screen. In the background, a dark cup sits on a white coaster.

# BE A FRIEND TO YOURSELF

By R. D. Ryan

PERHAPS I WAS SO OVERWHELMED BY THE NUMBING VARIETY OF DETAIL I HAD TO ATTEND TO THROUGHOUT HOLY WEEK AND THE EASTER SEASON. Routine tasks by then seemed insurmountable and important things began slipping my mind. My sermons lacked verve, and composing them was no longer a joy; writing a reflection for the newsletter and other commonplace tasks seemed insurmountable.

Perhaps I was simply overworked. Or perhaps I was experiencing a minor burn-out, my impatience exacerbated by the knowledge that I had five full weeks of vacation before me. Maybe I was mildly depressed. Maybe the debilitation of *acedia*—where good and holy things feel pointless—had





affected my soul. Or maybe the arthritis in my shoulders... Or maybe...

Whatever it was, I wasn't hitting on all cylinders; I was running on a flat tire; I was dropping the ball; I was flagged out. You choose the cliché.

#### SIMPLE MISTAKE BECOMES A MORAL FAILING

When came the last straw. There I sat on that warm, sunny Pentecost afternoon, celebrating my relief that the funeral-home visitation scheduled for that after-

noon had been moved to Tuesday, and I had three full days to write the homily. I was free to relax and enjoy a burger and beer at a local pub with my wife. I relished the moment; I delighted in her company; I enjoyed the conversation she instigated with a bar patron on an adjoining stool. So, there I sat, feeling calm and relaxed and filled with the joy of life when I glanced down at the calendar on my phone and realized that I had completely forgotten the retirement dinner of one of my oldest, dearest clerical friends.

Unbelievable. Unthinkable. Awful. What kind of idiot, what kind of friend, what kind of human being would do something so inexcusable? So thoughtless. Not only was my life running out of control, but I didn't even have the decency to remember an important marker in the life of a person very dear to me.

Wayne and I had begun seminary together in the late '60s, during difficult days when the forces of change were raging inside and outside the church, when the young wanted instant reform and their elders screamed "never." Tensions had run high at our seminary, and I had run afoul of our old-fashioned dean when I

fomented a modest protest aimed at urging him into early retirement—or at least forcing him to moderate his rigid stand on chapel ritual.

Wayne, both principled and tolerant, was far calmer in the face of such ferment than I. Nevertheless, he and I had formed a friendship that endured even after I decided that I must flee seminary at the dean's urging, abandon the ordination process, and return to graduate study. Wayne, however, remained in seminary, was ordained, and became a worthy servant of the Lord.



Years later, after I had established an academic career, I became a trustee at that same seminary. And Wayne and I picked up our friendship as if some 25 years had not intervened. And when I decided that I must respond to a resurgent call to the priesthood, Wayne was quick to offer himself as sponsor and guide. I cannot possibly convey how much comfort it was to have him walking beside me on that labyrinthine journey that had begun so long ago and now was continuing so improbably and so providentially.

I felt a  
sense of peace  
wash over me.

And now I had so thoughtlessly, selfishly, blown off his retirement party.

Of course, it never occurred to me that I was indulging in a virulent and

un-Christian form of judgmentalism: I was turning forgetfulness or thoughtlessness into a moral fault and serving as my own judge, jury, and executioner.

#### GOD SPEAKS THROUGH ORDINARY MEANS

Every so often in my ministry, someone will approach me hesitantly with a question about whether this encounter or that reading from Scripture or a certain piece of advice from a self-help authority might have been carrying a personal message from God. The conversation usually goes something like this:

*You know, I was really angry with my sister (or whomever) about the way she treated me. I just could not imagine why she would be so insensitive and hurtful. I have carried that around with me for weeks, and the burden of my anger was eating me alive. And then, this morning, I was saying the Lord's Prayer as I often do. And that phrase I so automatically repeat day after day—'forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us'—just leaped out at me. And I realized that unless I forgave my sister I could*

*never be free. Pastor, do you think that was God talking directly to me?*

At that point, I usually nod sympathetically and respond with another question: "What were the 'fruits of your encounter? How did it make you feel toward God, your sister, and yourself?" And when I sense that encounter is genuine, I often hear in the reply an echo of Ignatius Loyola's description of the state of spiritual consolation: "It is characteristic of God and his angels... to give true gladness and spiritual joy, whilst banishing all the sadness and distress brought on by the enemy [the diabolical]"... "for it is the Creator's prerogative to enter the soul and leave her and to arouse movements which draw her entirely into the love of his Divine Majesty" (The Spiritual Exercises: Second Set of Rules of Discernment, Rules 1 and 2, from *Understanding the Spiritual Exercises* by Michael Ivens, Gracewing-Indigo, 1998). So, when my parishioner says that she or he experienced a sense of peace and joy and felt God's presence, I reply, "I think you have received a message from God. That was God's voice."

#### MY OWN MESSAGE OF CONSOLATION

Once we returned home that evening, I continued to berate myself and to devise various strategies for apologizing to my friend. Perhaps I could say that the previously scheduled funeral home visitation had gone overtime. But that would be a bald-faced lie. Surely I could mitigate the blame by saying that the change in the date tricked me in to thinking that I had no further obligations, which was true—as far as it went. Or perhaps I could explain the situation in email and thus avoid direct contact, but that was the coward's way out.

"The best thing to do," my spouse said, "is to call Wayne tomorrow and apologize and just tell the truth. And I knew that she was correct. That was the hard way, but it was the only right way.

So, I resolved to call. Still, I continued to stew



about my mistake, wondering again and again how I could have been so insensitive to forget a dear friend's retirement dinner. I was a bad friend, an insensitive pastor, and a lousy human being.

Eventually, we headed off to bed and propped up as usual with our books. For the last several nights, I had been reading Brian D. McLaren's *Naked Spirituality: A Life with God in 12 Simple Words* (HarperOne, 2011). The book ponders four essential stages in spiritual development: simplicity, complexity, perplexity, and harmony.

Currently, I was reading the section on complexity, which describes several spiritual practices to help the believer cope with the realization that the life of faith requires dealing with a host of contradictory thoughts and beliefs.

The passage I was reading described a moment of enlightenment that overcame a younger, self-deprecating McLaren while he was jogging along listening to a taped lecture on Abraham Lincoln. The lecturer was quoting from Lincoln: "I desire to so conduct the affairs of this administration that if, at the end,... I have lost every friend on earth, I shall have one friend left, and that friend shall be down inside me" (in *Carl Sandberg, Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years and the War Years*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1966, p 427). McLaren's reaction was intense:

*As I heard those words, it was as if the Spirit took them and pierced me to the core with them. Out of that deepest part of me, I felt a sob erupt. I had to stop running for a few minutes and found myself hunched over in the middle of the trail, feeling that in some mysterious way God was speaking to me and it was a matter of life and death that I listen. And the message that came to me was the realization that, deep down inside of me, I had an enemy, not a friend. If a friend made a mistake, I would tell him it was okay, that nobody's perfect. But when I made a mistake, I would constantly beat myself up and mercilessly take myself to*

*task.... And so that day I felt the Spirit using a quote from Abraham Lincoln (taken completely out of context) to tell me that if I was going to last, I actually needed to follow Jesus' words about loving others as myself, which required me to first be a friend to myself. (p. 111)*

Not only had the Spirit used the quotation to speak to McLaren, but through McLaren, the Spirit had spoken to me. I felt a sense of peace wash over me. I felt self-forgiveness sweeping my soul, not just God's forgiveness, but my own forgiveness of myself. For I knew then that I was capable of developing self-love: not the sinful self-love of self-centeredness and indulgence. But the love that forgives the self as it forgives others and as God forgives us.

By becoming a friend to myself, I learned to look at myself through what I trust are God's eyes. God's eyes, to be sure, can be the eyes of judgment—the eyes of the commandments. But God's eyes are also the eyes of mercy and love—love of the shining soul that God created and wills me to be. Too often I had seen my own soul through the eyes of judgment. Now, I was learning to see myself whole.

#### RECEIVING A FRIEND'S FORGIVENESS

The next morning, I phoned my old friend, intent on apologizing and inviting him to lunch at a fine restaurant. Before I could even launch into the litany of faults I intended to confess, Wayne responded with that deep and prolonged chuckle of his. No, he wasn't upset with me; yes, he would love to have lunch.

My old friend was a true friend indeed. For he saw me through the eyes of his own love.

And God was, I trusted, granting me the grace to begin seeing myself in just the same way. Seeing myself as others see me, as God sees me, was no longer frightening. 🌸

**The Rev. Robert O. Wyatt** is rector of St. Helena's Episcopal Church in Burr Ridge, IL.





LET US PRAY

## Beyond Boundaries

by Julie K. Aageson

Like many of you, I remember discovering the wonder of reading a book as a child. It had to do with entering another world, experiencing a different sense of time, and getting to know people I'd never met. Reading continues to be a passion of mine partly because it takes me beyond the boundaries of my own life and experience.

As Advent approaches, I'm reminded again of the boundaries that are broken in this season of "Christ-coming." Every year, I mull on this mystery and what it means that God should come to us in the form of a child—truly beyond the boundaries of our understanding. God with us! What does it mean?

Two remarkable books have affected my wrestling with this question as much perhaps as the biblical story itself: *Take This Bread: A Radical Conversion* and *Jesus Freak*, both by Sara Miles. Each is a compelling example of boundary-breaking and each speaks especially to those of us who may have grown a bit too accustomed to the story of Christ's coming.

Having grown up with no experience of the church and with parents who intentionally avoided all things religious, Sara Miles describes her own unlikely journey to faith. She writes eloquently about the wildness of God's sense of time and the spaciousness of God's meaning. She discovers the wonder of this God beyond boundaries in the Bible, in the liturgy of the church.

But equally beyond boundaries, this unlikely convert discovers the earthiness of God. She writes about the body of

Christ and the bodies that bear Christ. She breaks boundaries and sets her church on a path of feeding and caring for people who are strangers to church, broken in mind and spirit. She sees Christ in each of them and knows food to be more than food, a well-set table more than hospitality. She believes that Christ lives in our bodies!

In all its commonness, the story of the birth of Jesus is earthy on every level. It's about a young unmarried woman chosen to bear a child. It's about a journey in an unlikely part of the world where there is no room for the woman or her child. What in the world are we to make of it? This is a story no less compelling now than when I was a girl hearing it and reading it for the first time.

What does it mean that we should prepare a place for Jesus to be born? That Jesus should find a home in us? That Jesus should come to us in the body of a woman? What does it mean that the workings of God are shown to us in Jesus and in the ordinary rituals of our lives? There is a spaciousness to God's meaning that defies the well-worn parameters we use to keep God more understandable.

As you prepare for Christmas, may the boundary-breaking story of Christ's coming cause you to consider these questions in new and boundary-breaking ways! 🌿

**Julie K. Aageson** is coordinator of ELCA Resource Centers and director of the Resource Center for the Eastern North Dakota Synod. She is a member of Bethesda Lutheran Church in Moorhead, Minn.

Read an excerpt from Sara Miles' book *Jesus Freak* in the upcoming January/February 2012 issue of *Gather*.





WE RECOMMEND

## Resources for action, advocacy, programs, or further study

Compiled from sources including  
the ELCA News Service, Seeds for  
the Parish, and [www.elca.org](http://www.elca.org)

### Looking for something to do?

As you plan your 2012 year, check out Women of the ELCA's free resources. There are many topics, from prayer to health to hospitality, from grief to journaling to knitting as a spiritual practice. You can find ice breakers, one hour sessions, leader's guides, multi-sessions, and retreat resources at on the Web site, [www.womenoftheelca.org](http://www.womenoftheelca.org).

Two resources especially relevant in this season include:

*A Different Kind of Journey:*

*Advent as a Walk, Not a Sprint*

We spend a lot of our lives waiting: at stoplights, in stores or ticket lines. *Advent* means to arrive, to come. It refers to both past and future as we celebrate the coming of Christ into our world and look toward to his coming again. In this new resource, you are invited on a journey to claim the best of what Advent is and can be.

*The Colors of Christmas:*

*A Reflection on Preparing for Christmas*

Our celebrations are often sprinkled with seasonal traditions that bring us joy and remind us of times gone by or people who have graced our lives. Do you know where or when your traditions began and the meaning behind them? This resource takes a look at the some of the customs around Christmas.

### Are you interested in diaconal ministry?

Each year, the Deaconess Community and a rotating seminary offer a course

designed for those interested in learning more about the history of *diakonia*.

In 2012, the course will be held January 9–20 at the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago. Tuition is paid by the deaconess community of the ELCA. Students are responsible for the cost of all books. Limited housing is available on campus for \$40 per night.

The course covers the history of *diakonia* through the centuries, its present expressions, and its future possibilities. Students examine and discern their own call to ministry, explore the development of spiritual disciplines essential to all Christians, and earn a seminary credit.

For more information, visit [www.elca.org/deaconess/jterm](http://www.elca.org/deaconess/jterm) or contact Patricia A. Bartley at [pbartley@lstc.edu](mailto:pbartley@lstc.edu) or Sister Sylvia Countess at [sylvia.countess@elca.org](mailto:sylvia.countess@elca.org).

### Pass on your paperbacks

You can collect and ship used paperback books to troops, both abroad and in the United States, to help them through tough times and let them know their service is appreciated.

Operation Paperback is a non-profit organization that collects gently used books nationwide and sends them to American troops deployed overseas. Since 1999, the organization has shipped more than 1.3 million books to locations around the globe.

To find out more, visit [www.operationpaperback.org](http://www.operationpaperback.org) or AARP's Create the Good Web site ([www.createthegood.org](http://www.createthegood.org)) and look under the "how-to guides" tab.



A SOFT, SPIRITUAL HUM OVERLAYS THE QUIET OF A HOSPICE ROOM IN BELLINGHAM, WASH. THE BLENDED VOICES OF THREE WOMEN FLOW FROM HUM TO QUIET HYMN AND EVENTUALLY TO SILENCE

# at the threshold

*by Aaron Cooper*





The recipient is a dying 96-year-old German woman with Parkinson's disease, unable to respond with facial movements. One of the three singers, long-time nurse Colleen O'Rell, sung for the elderly woman a half-dozen times before this visit.

"I've never seen her eyes open," said Colleen who joined the Bellingham Threshold Singers soon after the choir was formed in 2007. Colleen and 30 other women make up the group of dedicated volunteers who sing regularly at the bedside of terminally ill patients in the Bellingham area.

A couple of weeks ago when the group was singing for the woman with Parkinson's, Colleen asked them to hum the Brahms Lullaby. Then she sang some of the German words that she recalled from her childhood.

"Though she never opened her eyes, there were tears on her cheeks," Colleen said. "It was incredible being able to reach someone that way. You don't know where they are, but you know that hearing is the last thing to go: just trusting the music and really trying to send that person as much love and caring as possible."

"There is something about the power of women's voices together with intention that is just beautiful," she added. "It's such a gift."

## GETTING STARTED

Professional musician Linda Allen is the former director of the choir that is a branch of the national Threshold Choir organization founded in California in 2000 by Kate Munger.

"I heard about [the Threshold Choir] maybe four or five years ago and thought how much I would love to establish something like that in Bellingham," Linda said. "In the summer of 2007, I first put out the word inviting people to join me. And now we're up to about 30 members and a larger community of people who are supportive of our goal and mission."

The Bellingham Threshold Singers gather during two group rehearsals on the second and fourth Tuesdays

of each month. There the members learn a common repertoire of songs—many written by Threshold Choir members from all over the United States—in preparation to sing at the bedside of terminally ill patients.

Under the direction of Linda, choir members are divided up into three main categories: anchors, sails, and others. Anchors represent singers who have a higher level of training and have agreed to be group leaders for visits to the bedside of clients. They coordinate the visit with the family or institution that requested it, choose songs, and ensure the visit itself and the flow of songs goes smoothly.

Sails are members who also have musical training but not as extensive as anchors. Several sails are usually present for each visit. And those who fall into a third category—not yet an anchor or a sail—may serve the choir in various ways or just come to be part of the singing on rehearsal nights.

"Linda was an exceptional director," said Colleen. "She brought a sense of calmness and knowledge to our group, a real kindness."

## AT THE BEDSIDE

The process usually begins with a caregiver contacting Matilda Wheeler, a volunteer coordinator who answers the group's cell phone and e-mail. Then Matilda sends out a visit request to all singers—especially anchors—with details and the level of urgency. Typically when an anchor says she can be there, the process continues until a few sails are on board and a small group comes together.

At the bedside of a client—often at the local Whatcom Hospice House, a group care home, or the client's own residence—a small group of singers sits in a circle around the person.

Colleen said the choir assures the patient and family that they are not there to be entertained. "We tell people, 'There's nothing for you to do. You can close your eyes if you want, and if you fall asleep that's the



best compliment you can give us.” Then the group sings very quietly. Linda said, “We allow lots of space for silence between songs. If there are family members or caregivers there, we also offer this gift to them.”

She said the group adjusts what it sings depending on where the person is in the process of dying. If the person is awake and aware and interactive, then the group may sing rounds and harmonies and familiar songs, and it can be more playful.

“When we are singing for someone who is actively dying, it’s a very different process,” Linda said. “We do a lot more humming. We won’t be likely to sing familiar songs, and we sing fewer words.”

### NON-DENOMINATIONAL MINISTRY

Colleen said the group is akin to church for her because she believes so deeply in its ministry. The group is non-denominational and offers songs and hymns from a variety of backgrounds, languages, and traditions, allowing them unique entry into the lives of people with an equally diverse set of backgrounds and circumstances.

“One of the things I value about this group of women is that we do not come from any one particular faith group, and we don’t serve people of only one faith,” said April Boyden, a Lutheran deaconess with a background in hospice chaplaincy who has been with the group for two years.

“We each come from our own journeys, and we seek to meet people wherever they are,” Boyden said. “We sing in a language that is quickly comfortable no matter who you are, honoring those things that for me represent God and the Holy Spirit—symbols of love and light and peace and hope.”

The Pacific Northwest where they live is often referred to as the “None Zone,” said April, because on hospital intake forms, people are likely to check “none” on the question of religious affiliation. “So we tend to sing for a lot of Pacific Northwesterners who would just

as soon go hiking on a Sunday morning than go to a place of worship,” she said.

“Everyone is so different,” Colleen says. “Sometimes funny things happen. We were singing to one woman whose eyes were hardly open. Every now and then she’d open one eye—she looked really peaceful. All of a sudden both her eyes popped open, and she asked, ‘How much longer is this gonna take?’ I wasn’t sure if she was talking about the music or the dying.”

The people who journey with families when a loved one is dying play a unique role, with a goal of offering comfort and support, said April. “And to have a specific role of offering lullaby-like singing—whether because it’s a distraction while a nurse is performing an uncomfortable procedure or because [the patient] is waiting for medication to kick in—gathering around a song is helpful in that way.”

### DIFFICULT, YET MEANINGFUL

So what does it take to join the choir?

Requirements include supporting the mission of the Threshold Choir, being able to carry a tune, and being able to blend voices with others. “We also want people to have thought some about their own feelings about death and dying,” Linda said.

Being at the bedside of someone who is dying is difficult, she said. Sometimes singers realize “maybe they weren’t quite ready. Maybe they have had a recent loss or they’re still dealing with their own feelings about death and dying.”

Before joining the choir, people are asked to think about whether they are ready to sing near a dying person and his or her family.

“It can be messy,” Linda said. “It can be disorganized. It can be chaotic. It takes a lot of spontaneity and a lot of creativity to know how to be with people in crisis.”

Several Bellingham Threshold Singers visited Hank, a man at the threshold between life and death.



# we just try to let the music be.

The singers met in Hank's hospital room with his son and daughter-in-law, both of whom sat on one side of Hank's bed. One singer sat on the other side of the bed and two others sat at the foot. Hank was unconscious and his breath raspy. There was a lot of noise coming from the hallway—aides delivering dinners, patients chatting and calling. While in Hank's room, the singers created a quiet, sacred space for him and his family with their intentions and their songs.

"We try not to have a lot of conversation at the bedside unless it seems really important," said Colleen. "We just try to let the music be."

As the women sang, gently and slowly, Hank's breathing became softer. They could see Hank's son and daughter-in-law visibly relax as they held hands and released their tears.

The women sang for about 30 minutes; some of the songs were both for Hank and his family but toward the end they really focused on Hank and his journey. The hospital room seemed transformed. When they left, there were hugs all around.

Hank died two hours later. Soon after, his son asked the hospice volunteer to call the group and thank them for giving his father such a beautiful send-off.

"My father was in hospice care when he died," said Sylvia Tag, a librarian and group member for three years. "The outreach and ministry to people who are dying was something I became more alert to after that experience."

When she saw an article about the group in *The Bellingham Herald*, a local newspaper, she thought it would be a perfect ministry for her. "I didn't have enough time to be a hospice volunteer," Sylvia said. "The Bellingham Threshold Singers is just right for me. I can commit fully to what's required and still work with this wonderful population."

Someone in the next county is now starting a choir after working with the Bellingham Threshold Singers, Sylvia said. "So that's pretty wonderful. Starting up a group like this does take a good leader and leadership team," she said. "But it's not the kind of work that has to be so momentous if someone feels really drawn to and called to this work. It's absolutely doable."

Women show up for people at the threshold between life and death, said Linda. "We usher in that new life and we are there to usher them out again. We are there to be a bridge." ❁

**Aaron Cooper** is a freelance writer and editor based in Chicago.

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Earlier this year, Women of the ELCA awarded a grant of \$1,500 to the Bellingham Threshold Singers for bedside singing training.

Additional chapters of the national Threshold Choir are active in Alaska, Hawaii, Canada, United Kingdom, and throughout the continental United States. Several more are planned in

additional U.S. cities and Iceland. To learn more about the national organization and how to start a choir, visit [www.thresholdchoir.org](http://www.thresholdchoir.org).

To learn more about the Bellingham Threshold Singers, visit [www.bellinghamthresholdchoir.org](http://www.bellinghamthresholdchoir.org).

In 2011, Women of the ELCA gave \$72,000 to 32 projects—22 domestic

and 10 international that are making a positive difference in the lives of women and children.

For more information about grants and to download an application, visit the Web site at [www.womenoftheelca.org](http://www.womenoftheelca.org). The next round of grant proposals will be accepted between December 15, 2011, and February 15, 2012.





*He said to them: "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." (Mark 6:31)*

I am not by nature a "quiet time" person. When I somehow landed at an evangelical Christian college for my freshman year and heard dorm mates discussing their quiet time, I got very quiet indeed. Never done it. Didn't aspire to it. Sounded boring.

The way I envisioned it was that someone sits down with a Bible and maybe a notebook and begins to pray for world peace, social justice, and folks who are sick.

When I sit down with a Bible and maybe a notebook, I start thinking about what's for lunch.

Quiet time was not for me.

But then I got married. I entered a profession that involved interacting with people all day long. I had three children in five years. And oh how I longed for quiet time. I was dealing with crowds at my work, crowds in my home, crowds in my mind.

Jesus too had to deal with crowds. He speaks to thousands, touches many, has lunch with multitudes, welcomes clusters of children, and works miracles in front of countless watching eyes. Indeed, the word *crowd* is mentioned 101 times in the gospels, 32 times in the Gospel of Mark alone. Jesus is continually attracting people and he is often at the center of their attention.

Extroverts are people who are outgoing and energized by being with people, whereas introverts are those who tend to be quieter and are energized by regular (and sometimes extended) time alone. Using those rough definitions, many people would consider Jesus an extrovert. In fact, a recent book (*Introverts in the Church, Finding our Place in an Extroverted Culture* by Adam S. McHugh; InterVarsity Press, 2009) has promoted a lively discussion about the tendency



by Christa von Zychlin

of Christian churches and especially church evangelism programs to appeal mostly to extroverts. Didn't Jesus do his best work in and for whole groups of people? Aren't we church folk always pushing people into group worship, group Bible studies, group service projects? Isn't the new name for our magazine *Gather*?

Gathering is certainly important for a full Christian life. Jesus was continually gathering people. Yet what a comfort it is for those of us with some introvert characteristics to observe that Jesus was a

person who also needed his time alone. All four of the gospels note his habit of retreating from the public eye, and the Gospel of Luke states it plainly, "... many crowds would gather to hear him and to be cured of their diseases. But he would withdraw to deserted places and pray" (Luke 5:15b-16).

#### Sanctuaries in a crowded life

Now our world is more crowded than ever. I personally live in one of the most congested places on earth. As an ELCA missionary, I serve with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Hong Kong and often find myself in an area of Hong Kong known as *Mong Kok*, which has more than 350,000 people per square mile. The shopping mall near our home has more than a million people traipsing through it each weekend. The subway system which I use to travel nearly everywhere in Hong Kong leaves no room for personal space.

All of which drives home to me the point that a rhythm of togetherness and alone time is essential for many people, most people, and definitely for me. "Alone time" is translated as "a deserted place" in Mark 6:31 in the NRSV, but other translations use the phrase, "a place apart."

For those of you who, like me, are not by nature quiet-time people, but who nevertheless relish and long for a place apart, I have compiled a list of sanctuaries where God has nurtured me throughout the years. I have not always recognized them as quiet places, but today I see them as spaces God has given me for my soul to grow. Perhaps some of these places and spaces will resonate with you.

CUDDLING AND NURSING INFANTS When my own rhythms of time management were rudely and wonderfully interrupted by the birth of my first child, I discovered my child's biological thirst for nourishment and touch was perfectly complemented by my own need to devote 100 percent of my attention to him, in my arms. This little child allowed me no multi-tasking and I, for once, was not even tempted. There was nothing more important for me to be doing. The Creator of the universe was present.

#### VISITING THE SILENT ONES IN THE NURSING HOME

Many of you know all too well the latter stages of dementia. Gone are the ceaseless questions, the hurt, the demands, the pacing, the confusion. Sometimes, in their wake, the latter stages of dementia can provide a certain peace.

As a visitor to nursing homes, I would (sometimes) resist the temptation to leave a church prayer card on the bedside table of a person who was too incapacitated to respond. Instead I would receive the situation as an invitation to sit and be silent. Often I quietly read a psalm. Agnes, a woman on our church's homebound list, gave me a place apart, a time to read the psalms aloud.



BEDTIME WITH LITTLE ONES Story time. Prayer time. Sharing highs and lows of the day. Occasionally our whole family would gather for bedtime devotions, but more likely either my husband or I would give one-on-one time to our kids. Sometimes we were tired. Sometimes we didn't feel like reading bedtime books. Then our youngest would call downstairs, "Isn't anyone going to say prayers with me?" and one of us would dutifully trudge up to his room. Close the door. Read. Possibly sing. Pray. "Leave the door open on the way out, Mom?" Yes I'll leave the door open and the nightlight on. *Jesus Christ is the light of the world*, this quiet time in my youngest child's room has helped me remember, *the light no darkness can overcome*.

THE SMALL SERVICES I will admit it, as a church leader active in evangelism, I think about numbers a lot. I've always wanted crowds in my church. Big crowds. I am eager to see more people receive Christ and enrich church worship and outreach with their insights, energies, and talents. But now that I'm not in the role of parish pastor, I've discovered the beauty of small gatherings. I actively seek out evening and week-day worship services with the fewest number of people. At my home in Hong Kong, I sometimes worship in a tiny church where the music is done *a capella*, there are stretches of silence, and nobody keeps lists of numbers of worshippers.

AVOCATIONS The word *avocation* comes from the Latin word *avocare* meaning *to call away*. What is it that calls you away from your busy daily life into an alternative universe of creativity and flow? For one person it may be tinkering with engines, coaxing an old motor back to life. Another might go for a bike ride and enjoy the breeze. Photography is an avocation that pushes a person to look at the world with fresh eyes. In each of these, God accompanies us and shapes our ways.

GARDENS Few other places apart have so many resonances with the gospels: planting seeds, enduring weeds, thirsting for rain, shriveling in the sun, fighting invisible insect enemies, beholding the glories of a garden in full bloom or bursting with fruit, or feeling a breeze (come Holy Spirit) on a hot August day. Gardens deserve a category all their own as rooms for the soul.

MOUNTAIN CLIMBING Mount Sinai, Mount Carmel, the Mount of Olives, Mount Zion—these are all mountains where the people of God encounter God in dramatic new ways. This makes sense to me. Walk up a mountain, and even if you're in shape (which for me, alas, is not always the case) you feel the air pass differently through your lungs. Leg muscles are challenged. You thirst. You pass the occasional snake, the toughest little wildflower. You gain a new vista. The Lord of Heaven is breathtakingly near.

CHORES Was Mary alone when the angel came to tell her she was chosen to be the Savior's mother? Martin Luther suggests she probably wasn't at worship or prayer. She may well have been sweeping or doing other household chores. Moses was doing his routine sheep herding when God spoke to him out of a burning bush. Rebecca was hauling water from a well when she met God's servant. Zebedee's boys were busy untangling their fishing nets when God's Son came and upended their lives. The Samaritan woman was fulfilling a simple request for water when her own thirst for God was deliciously quenched. While not always my favorite form of a place apart, I have to admit that regular chores such as cleaning the bathroom, mopping the floor, or preparing lunches can have a spiritual effect. Sometimes as my hands are busy at work I am able to experience what Brother Lawrence in the 17th century called "Practicing the Presence of God." (Find more about Brother Lawrence at [www.practicing-godspresence.com](http://www.practicing-godspresence.com).)



**CHAPELS AND RETREAT CENTERS** I have witnessed the importance of sanctuaries expressly constructed for private prayer:

A chapel at church, where a certain elderly gentleman stopped by twice a week to pray and remember.

A hospital chapel, where the father of a dying child found room to vent his anguish.

A retreat center chapel where a teenager discovered her need for repentance, then tracked down a minister who would listen to her private confession and speak God's words of absolution to her directly in that small space.

**RUNNING (OR WALKING)** I ran my first mile at that same Christian college where I started as a freshman. I've been running ever since and have discovered that my best, most dependable place apart is on a running path. As my feet pound the gravel or pavement, I pray for my friends, my enemies, my projects. I pray for my children, the students I teach, a mantra of names. Sometimes it's world problems and sometimes it's eliminations about work—*thud, thud, thud*—I place them before God.

I am like a turtle, I go slow. I am like a turtle, I carry my small room with me.

### A place for the Spirit to roam

In the (many) intervening years since my college freshman days, I have discovered that while I still recoil a little at the use of the phrase "quiet time," today I not only enjoy, but desperately need regular and quiet space for prayer, reflection, and practicing God's presence. As feminist author Virginia Woolf so memorably put it in her 1929 essay, "A Room of One's Own," it is essential to the vibrant and creative life. As Jesus taught us 2,000 years ago, go into a private place and shut the door behind you (Matthew 6:6a). This may not be a room with walls or a physical door. It is a place and a time that is quiet and lone and provides wide welcome stretches for the Spirit to roam. 🌸

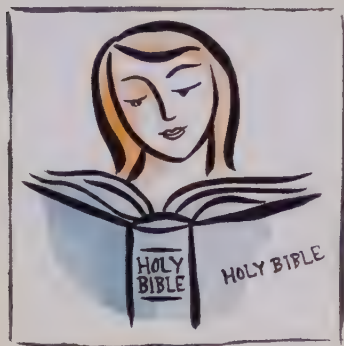
**The Rev. Christa von Zychlin** lives in Hong Kong, China, where she teaches adults and children through ELCA Global Mission and the ELCHK (Evangelical Lutheran Church of Hong Kong). Learn about Missionary Sponsorship at [www.elca.org/missionarysponsorship](http://www.elca.org/missionarysponsorship). You may also read more about Christa's adventures in Hong Kong at [www.marathonangel.blogspot.com](http://www.marathonangel.blogspot.com).

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## FOR REFLECTION OR DISCUSSION

1. What comes to your mind when you hear the phrase, "quiet time"? Does it have positive or negative connotation for you?
2. On a scale of 1 (introvert) to 10 (extrovert) would you describe yourself as an introvert or an extrovert? Are you the same level of introvert/extrovert today as when you were five years old? 15? 25? 50?
3. In general, would you rather spend an afternoon with thousands of people at an enjoyable event, or spend an afternoon alone in an enjoyable place?
4. Have your most profound experiences of God been...
  - A. Alone?
  - B. With a small group? (from 2-12)
  - C. In a larger group where you knew most of the people? (Perhaps a church service, a service event, a wedding or a funeral)
5. Do any of the rooms mentioned by the author strike a chord with you? Do you have other "rooms" in which you have had experiences of God?





## BIBLE STUDY

## BEYOND THE BOUNDARIES

by Patricia Lull

## Opening Hymn

*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 676

"Lord, Speak to Us, that We May Speak," verses 1, 2 and 4

## Prayer

Mighty God, you open wide your hand and sustain all living things. Open our lives that we might be fed by your Word; in Christ's name we pray. Amen.

## Introduction to Mark 6:30–7:37

## Beyond the Boundaries

As a college student I worked for a couple of summers in a ketchup factory. The work was hot and noisy. But looking back, it was one of the best experiences of my life. I learned some things there that I could never have learned in a classroom.

Part of the work included sorting tomatoes as they arrived by truckload from the nearby fields. The tomatoes were sent down chutes into a room where they were sorted as they flowed by on a thin stream of water. Stems and chunks of rotten tomatoes were removed by hand or with vacuum hoses.

We women (and it was only

women in those days) organized ourselves into teams of six and by the second or third day, the teams were set for the rest of "the run" as the harvest was called. At my sorting trough, there were two college students, two mothers of young children working the run to make money to buy school clothes for their kids, and two women from the migrant community, who moved north each summer for farm labor jobs.

The work was not so much physically demanding as tedious, requiring us stand in place for seven to 10 hours a day. Before long we settled into conversations around our table. And therein was the gift. Never before and never since have I had the privilege to join in such genuine conversation with others as diverse as my co-workers that summer.

We didn't stumble into profound exchanges every shift, but a number of times we spoke and listened as honestly as human beings can with one another. I still remember some of our discussions about family life, religion, and tough social issues like abortion and war. Stuck in a minimum-wage job, pitching in to help

## Theme Verse

*"How many loaves have you?"*

*Go and see..."*

Mark 6:38



When someone had a rough day or needed a break, a quiet rapport began to stretch across the differences of class and education, faith and ethnicity. Bold truth was spoken over the sloshing of the tomatoes in the chutes.

In these texts, Mark portrays Jesus as his public ministry carries him further and further from Nazareth and Capernaum, revealing his power among Gentiles amidst increasing the tensions with the Jewish teachers from Jerusalem. All boundaries that categorize people by religion and race and political identity begin to dissolve.

## Back to the Story

### LEAD MARK 6:30–32.

The narrative of the disciples' missionary venture in Mark 6:7–13 now comes to a close. It was interrupted by the account of the death of John the Baptist and Herod's complicity in that tragedy. Now, attention shifts to Jesus, but it comes with premonition that trouble may await him, too, as John's successor.

The rhythm of being in public and retreating for rest and renewal was introduced in Mark 1 when Jesus was driven by the Spirit into the wilderness following his baptism. This pattern is repeated in 4:35–41. A "deserted place" means a place for prayer and nearness to God. In the Bible it is often the place where vocation is also put to the test.

Knowing that they have been too busy even to eat, Jesus pulls his disciples away. It matters to him that his followers have time to rest. (See "A Place Apart," p. 22.)

1. When do you find time to be renewed in God's presence? Is there a place that is a "place apart" for you?

## Boats and Fishes

### LEAD MARK 6:33–44.

The urgency and intensity surrounding Jesus and his mission continues. There is no real getting away for Jesus and his disciples. The crowds are on the shore waiting for Jesus as he disembarks from the boat.

Imagery of a shepherd and sheep is familiar to many in the church today. In this Gospel it points back to significant Old Testament images for God and God's agent or Messiah. For example, Ezekiel 34:7–16 speaks of the distinction between false shepherds and the authentic, divine shepherd, who will feed and tend the flocks and deliver justice. The shepherd is the one who sustains life, feeds the hungry, and insures the safety of all.

Jesus' motive here in the feeding of the 5,000 is compassion. Compassion is not pity but a sense of profound concern that extends to a widening group of people. Jesus' compassion first leads him to teach those who have come seeking him. (See "Be a Friend to Yourself," p. 12.)

Yet, the coming of nightfall churns up other anxieties. The disciples assume an active role here, bringing their concerns to Jesus. They want Jesus to stop teaching and to send the crowd on its way while there is still time for the people to take care of their own needs.

But Jesus responds in a different manner. He is not as concerned as the disciples are about the logistics of feeding a huge crowd. In the hunger of the crowd he sees something else.

What it means to be a disciple takes on a more corporate responsibility, too. "You give them something to eat," Jesus instructs in 6:37.

Mark presents this as a miracle story, revealing both God's perspective and Jesus' power. In the world of the Bible, food is a life-and-death concern. Food is seen as a gift from God, and having enough food to eat is a sign of God's blessing. Giving food to the hungry is also a significant part of the church's work. (See "Acting on the Gospel Call," p. 34.)

This story of feeding the 5,000 was remembered by early Christians in connection to the story of the Last Supper. Both include stylized, ritual language. Read Mark 14:22 and complete the chart on p. 28 to see the similarity in the words used in both accounts.



MARK 6:41 WHAT DID JESUS DO?	MARK 14:22 WHAT DID JESUS DO?
Taking 5 loaves and 2 fish	
Looked up to heaven	
Blessed	
Broke the loaves	
Gave to the disciples to set before the people	
Divided the 2 fish among them	

Now, we begin to see Jesus as one whose compassion is matched by God's generosity. He not only heals people one-by-one but provides the most basic necessities of life for the crowd. And he draws in his own disciples, asking them to both find the resources for this meal and to then gather up the broken pieces.

2. What hunger initiatives do you support through your congregation? Why does food remain such an important part of the church's ministry today?

## From Here to There

### READ MARK 6:45–56.

This section includes three discrete stories, each repeating themes or details presented earlier in Mark's Gospel. These stories are meant to underscore aspects of Jesus' ministry and his relationship with the disciples and others.

Notice the tone of urgency in 6:45. The narrative tumbles forward as it did in the first chapter of the Gospel. Do you recall another scene in which the disciples were apart from Jesus and came seeking him where he prayed? In Mark's Gospel we learn to anticipate fresh

revelations about Jesus' vocation following these times when he finds it necessary to seek solitude for prayer.

Mark 6:47–51 repeats elements of the calming of the seas in Mark 4:35–41. Though the disciples are not frightened by a storm, but by the sight of Jesus walking on the waves. When we want to describe someone with extraordinary skills today, we say that they "can walk on water." But Mark wants us to see in Jesus something more than extraordinary leadership skills. "Take heart; it is I; do not be afraid" in 6:50 resonates with the voice of God in Exodus 3:14 as he instructs Moses to reveal the will of the Lord to the Israelites.

"It is I" (*ego eimi* in the Greek) underscores that Jesus not only has the power to quiet wind and waves but is himself connected intimately with God. Along with the disciples, we are given a glimpse that this Jesus is something more than just a great teacher or miracle-worker. Yet, even this assurance does not calm those in the boat. Even as Jesus climbs aboard they are astounded rather than relieved.

Notice, too, the way Mark describes the fundamental puzzlement that keeps the disciples from fully



Understanding what has been going on in the feeding of the 5,000 and in this miraculous arrival of Jesus. Right now, they are more like seed sown on rocky soil than like seed that bear great fruit. Even the disciples don't come to understand who this Jesus is without times of puzzlement and not seeing at all. Like Pharaoh, the hearts of the disciples are hardened (Exodus 4:21, 7:4–5).

Once he is on the far shore, Jesus is again besieged by many in need of healing. For they have come to see in Jesus the source for wholeness and relief from disease. Like the bold woman in 5:28, many reach out to touch the fringe of his garment.

### The Tradition of the Elders

#### READ MARK 7:1–8.

The simmering conflict between the teachers from Jerusalem and Jesus and his disciples is obvious. Respect for established practices and teachings is no small matter in communities of faith. Yet, openness to innovation and fresh ideas matters also.

An added tension in Mark's account is conveyed in the detail that these Pharisees and scribes "had come from Jerusalem." You'll recall that Jesus' ministry has been unfolding in Galilee; several days' walk from the center of Jewish life in Jerusalem—and even into the foreign lands of Tyre and Sidon in what is today Lebanon.

Both Jews and Gentiles lived in Galilee. The explanatory comments in 7:3–4 were likely introduced by Mark so that all hearers of his Gospel could understand why ritual cleanliness before eating was important. That Jesus is remembered for a ministry that embraces outsiders and Gentiles was important for

early Christians, who found ethnic distinctions more significant than we may today.

The teachers have one question for Jesus: Why? Why is the pattern of life practiced by your disciples not the way of life we teach and lead? They want to know Jesus' motivation and the source of his authority for doing things in a new way.

Jesus does not answer their question directly. Instead, in Mark 7:6–7 Jesus quotes from Isaiah 29:13. Read Isaiah 29:13–16 to catch the tone of rebuke in the prophet's words, which must surely have been well-known to Jewish audiences.

Jesus is not being disloyal or dismissive of God's covenant with the Jews. Rather, like the ancient prophets, Jesus highlights the distinction between God's word and the traditions we develop to honor and protect our interpretation of God's word.

3. Can you think of examples of the tension that arise between established traditions and fresh innovations today? How do both tradition and innovation contribute to the vitality of your own congregation's life?

### If Time Permits: Jesus' Interpretation

#### READ MARK 7:9–23.

The confrontation between Jesus and the teachers from Jerusalem continues in this debate about corban and about clean and unclean matters. Jesus is aware of a practice in those days that allowed seemingly devout people to neglect the physical needs of their aging relatives while contributing, instead, to the economy of the Temple. In that context, those who were younger were obligated to care for the elderly. At the same time, those who were devout felt an obligation to follow up on vows (or *corban*) they made, including vows involving money for the Temple. Jesus is appalled that any child would seek a loop-hole in the obligation to support their parents. Whatever that custom may have involved, Jesus focuses attention back on God's original intention.



4. Have such tensions ever surfaced in your Bible study group?  
How do you talk about them when they do?

## A Place at the Table

### READ MARK 7:24–30.

We find Jesus in the region of Tyre, located in what is now Lebanon in an area north of Galilee. He is far from home, and Mark indicates in verse 24 that Jesus hoped to escape detection there. We do not know why Jesus traveled there, but it is important to recognize this setting as a significantly different social context.

Both Jews and Gentiles (or Greeks) would have lived in this region along the Mediterranean coast. Their lives would have overlapped but each group would have maintained a distinctive identity based on ethnicity, social class, and religious life. Alongside those distinctive identities would come the same suspicions and rivalries that polarize different groups today.

This woman joins with others in the Gospel who interrupt Jesus' plan with their desperate pleas for healing for themselves or for their children. Thus, she enters the house, kneeling before Jesus as Jairus knelt to plead for Jesus to heal his daughter in 5:22.

Mark tells us that the woman is a Gentile and is a Syrophonecian. Was she a wealthy woman, perhaps, from an urban background that enhanced her self-confidence in this exchange? Was she a poor woman or widow, coming to Jesus out of sheer desperation? The text does not say.

What we do know is that she speaks as a woman and a mother. If you've ever taken a child to an emergency room and grown frustrated by endless waiting, you may understand the urgency with which she addresses Jesus. This is not an easy conversation. Jesus' words do not fit many of our expectations about his gentleness and openness. To catch the nuance in this exchange, try to outline the actions, the actual words, and the tone of each comment in the chart below.

Initially, Jesus rebuffs her plea. Jesus dismisses her with a cryptic comment about the children's food and the dogs. Is this because she is a woman? A Gentile? A member of a wealthy, urban class that lives in opposition to the Jewish poorer farmers? Jesus' comment needs not be seen as a contrast about Jews and Gentiles, but it is clearly not consoling, as are so many of the words Jesus spoke to others who cried out to him for help.

As surprising as Jesus' words are, the quick retort of the woman is more surprising still. She will not disengage. She does not even counter his calling her a "dog." Rather, she turns his words on their head, pressing the image of the way in which dogs eat the crumbs from the family dinner table. Her sassy response turns the whole exchange around.

Jesus, who initially denied her petition, conceded that quick-thinking and confidence have insured the success of her mission. The woman's argument prevails, in marked contrast to the scribes and Pharisees.

WOMAN'S WORDS	JESUS' WORDS	WORDS THAT DESCRIBE THE TONE
v. 26 cast the demon out of my daughter		
	v. 27	
v. 28		
	v. 29	



much like Jairus, in Mark 5, she returns to find her daughter on her bed but free of the demon.

5. How does position and privilege play out in the world today? In your own community are there some groups with greater access to health care and schooling and other groups on the margins? Have there been times when those without as much privilege have demanded an equal share?
6. What connection do you see between this surprising story and the reception of women's voices in the church today?

## The Word is Out

### READ MARK 7:31–37.

Finally, Jesus' travels carry him back toward the Sea of Galilee. The Decapolis or "10 cities" designates an area to the east and southeast of the Sea of Galilee. It is an area in which many Gentiles lived alongside Jews.

This story includes intriguing details about the steps Jesus took to heal this man who suffered from both hearing loss and a speech impediment. Placing fingers in the man's ears, the use of saliva, and the prayer to heaven seem odd to us today but are elements of more ancient healing rituals.

*Ephphatha* means *be opened* in Aramaic, the language Jesus spoke in daily life. What is opened is more than just the man's ears. Mark intends for the ears of our understanding to be opened up, allowing us to see Jesus from yet another angle. The quotation in 7:37 is from Isaiah 35:5, one of the best-known passages confirming the nature of the Messiah.

Jesus is a healer, but he is not simply a healer like other healers in his day. Jesus tries to control the publicity surrounding his ministry, but the word is out.

7. Have you or anyone you know ever experienced a dramatic healing or a longed-for cure that restored health and strength like this man? If so, how has that experience shaped your relationship with God?

If you are keeping a chart of the disciples, look back at Mark 6:30–7:37 and decide which of these characters you will add to the list of those who follow Jesus.

## Looking Ahead

In the first seven chapters of Mark's Gospel much has been revealed about Jesus' identity. We have also witnessed a variety of responses to his preaching, teaching, and healing. Some have sought out Jesus and others have resisted him at every turn. What do you think of this one "who has done everything well" (7:37)? That will be the crucial question in the next session.

## Closing Prayer

Gracious God, in Jesus we learn to see the whole world in a new way. We thank you for those who have taught us to see strangers and foreigners, refugees and immigrants as your children, too. Amen. 🌿

The Rev. Patricia Lull is executive director of the St. Paul Area Council of Churches ([www.spacc.org](http://www.spacc.org)). An ELCA pastor, she has served as a parish pastor, director of campus ministry in the ELCA, and as dean of students at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minn.

## If Time Permits: An Investigative Exchange

We live in a time in which the opportunities to know people around the globe are increasing rapidly. Yet, some say that our genuine conversations with those of differing viewpoints are shrinking. It is challenging to listen to those whose perspectives stand in contrast to our own. What would the "certain young man" in Mark 14 have thought of the exchange between Jesus and the Syrophonecian woman? If you have such a conversation partner, read Mark 7:24–30 together. Talk about the barriers that impede communication today.

8. What recommendations do you have for bringing groups together for common conversation when those groups are seemingly divided by economic, racial, political, or religious differences? What role can the church play in hosting such dialogues?



HEALTH WISE

## Connect, Only Connect

by Molly M. Ginty

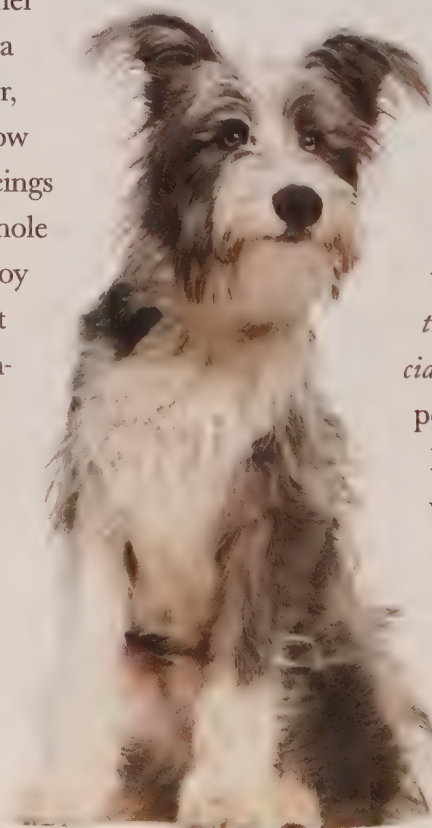
For a long time, Lois Flanigan felt *phhhht*. Plagued by multiple sclerosis, an autoimmune disease that attacks the nervous system, Flanigan was forced to quit her job as an administrative assistant because she felt too weak—and too glum—to crawl out of bed. Then she and her husband adopted a one-pound stray kitten who motivated her to get up and put out cat food in the morning. The fragile feline, named Einstein, began taking care of Flanigan, too, cuddling with her and standing vigil at the end of her bed whenever she was feeling her worst. In the six years since Flanigan, 56, welcomed a rescue animal into her home in Aberdeen, S.D., her symptoms have greatly improved—a change she attributes in large part to Einstein.

Do you feel better when you have extra company? Like Flanigan, you're not alone. Whether you share space with a shorthair, a schnauzer, or a spouse, studies show being around other beings can help you beat a whole host of diseases—and enjoy a longer, happier life. "It all comes down to connection," says Matthew Hertenstein, PhD, an experimental psychologist at DePauw University, in Greencastle, Ind. "Our biological foundation is built for us to be with others."

Some 150 years' worth of studies show that being around other people can boost your overall health—and that having pets can reduce your stress levels, the amount of medication you take, and the number of times you see the doctor. In the past decade, researchers have made major breakthroughs in the study of interpersonal connections, a field that they call "network science." In 2008, this topic seized headlines when a joint team of University of California and Harvard psychologists found that happiness is literally contagious. Researchers discovered that if you have a close friend who is happy, it increases the likelihood that you will be also by a whopping 15 percent (while happy friends of friends make you 10 percent happier).

What if your connections aren't always happy? The Harvard/UC team discovered that every unhappy

friend you have increases the likelihood that you will be unhappy by 7 percent. What if you sometime squabble with those you love? A *Journal of the American Medical Association* study found that people with the highest levels of marital stress were three times as likely to suffer heart attacks as others. But if your relationship stress is just sporadic—as it is for most of us—you



This ongoing column is part of the Women of the ELCA health initiative, Raising Up Healthy Women and Girls. Visit [www.womenoftheelca.org](http://www.womenoftheelca.org) for more information.



connection will still be a boon to your health.

"It's not whether a couple fights, but how they do that's key," says Timothy Smith, PhD, a psychology professor at the University of Utah in Salt Lake City who has studied relationships and heart disease. "If they show affection while bickering—perhaps squeezing their partner's hand or even using a term of endearment such as '*Honey*, you're driving me crazy!'—that warmth lowers their disease risk."

How can keeping company keep you healthy? Head on for the latest science on animal and human connection—all the more reason for you to celebrate this Christmas as you gather with friends and family (and perhaps with Fido) for food and festive fun.

### Cancer

Compared to single patients who live alone, married patients have a lower risk of colon, breast, and prostate cancers—and better survival outcomes, reports the American Cancer Society.

### Dementia

Being in love lowers your risk of Alzheimer's disease, and if you're married and living with a spouse by middle age, you're half as likely to get this form of dementia than if you're single and living alone, found Swedish researchers.

### Hypertension

Compared to non-pet owners, pet owners have "significantly lower" blood pressure, concluded a State University of New York study. (Research at the University of Pennsylvania found that just watching fish in an aquarium for as little as two minutes is enough to lower blood pressure).

### Immunity and Healing

Spouses who argue calmly have stronger immunity and recover twice as quickly from minor wounds as those who exhibit hostility while arguing, found Ohio State University researchers.

### Longevity

The remote Japanese island of Okinawa has one of the world's highest average life expectancies: 86 for women and 78 for men. Scientists say this likely stems in part from natives' practice of forming groups called *moais*—circles of close friends who support each other throughout life.

### Stroke

Seniors living in close-knit communities are more likely to recover from strokes, a recent University of Minnesota study concluded. Researchers asked seniors questions about their neighborhoods (such as "Do you know your neighbors by name?" and "Do you help each other out?"). Each "yes" answer was correlated with a 53 percent improvement in stroke survival rates.

Benefits like this could soon become more common, as we're entering an era of higher cohabitation. Last year, the U.S. Census reported that for the first time in more than a century, the average American household size is up (spiking from 2.53 people in 2009 to 2.63 people in 2010).

The American Veterinary Medical Association reports that the percentage of households with pets has risen 12 percent since 2001, and now stands at 60 percent. You don't have to be Einstein to figure out that this means we're enjoying more connections—with friends, family, and our furry friends, too. 🐾

**Molly M. Ginty** (<http://mollymaureenginty.wordpress.com>) lives in New York City. Her work has appeared in *Women's eNews*, *Marie Claire*, *Redbook*, and *Ms.*





# Acting ON THE GOSPEL CALL

When *Gather's* editor asked me to write a little something for this issue about ELCA World Hunger, I was delighted. Then when I went to the 2011 triennial gathering in Spokane (Were you there? Did you stop by my booth and pick up a little barn box?) and heard that the convention had passed a memorial urging every expression of Women of the ELCA to consider supporting ELCA World Hunger—well, what a perfect opportunity to re-introduce you to this vital ministry!

## A COMPREHENSIVE PROGRAM

ELCA World Hunger responds to global hunger and poverty by

addressing root causes. Through a comprehensive program of relief, development, education, and advocacy, people are connected to the resources they need to lift themselves out of poverty for good. Between 70 and 75 percent of ELCA World Hunger funds go to work internationally; the rest are spent in the United States.

## Relief

In times of crisis, no matter the cause, ELCA World Hunger provides individuals and communities with immediate access to food, shelter, clothing, water, and medical care. Whether providing meals to

homeless people in New York City or providing survival kits to refugees in Sudan, this work ensures that basic human needs are met.

## Development

ELCA World Hunger supports programs, projects and micro-enterprises that help families and communities lift themselves out of poverty for the long term. Cornerstones of this sustainable development work include:

**agriculture and livestock** > “God’s Global Barnyard” program is part of this work. Small-scale farmers improve their income with training



**The 2011 Triennial Convention of Women of the ELCA voted  
support ELCA World Hunger in a memorial that read in part:**

**WHEREAS**, hunger is an ongoing issue in our nation and the world...; and...

**WHEREAS**, ELCA World Hunger is a comprehensive and sustainable program that uses multiple strategies—relief, development, education and advocacy—to address the root causes of hunger and poverty...;

...therefore be it

**RESOLVED** that Women of the ELCA, its synodical organizations, congregations and its individual participants be encouraged to support with prayers and offerings ELCA World Hunger; and be it further...

**RESOLVED** that Women of the ELCA units and synodical organizations be encouraged to send their World Hunger offerings to the Women of the ELCA churchwide organization... as these offerings are sent on in full—100%—to ELCA World Hunger; and be it further

**RESOLVED** that synodical women's organization Web pages link to ELCA World Hunger to encourage use of resource packets and education toolkits; and be it further...

**RESOLVED** that Women of the ELCA participants be encouraged to become synod hunger leaders; and be it finally

**RESOLVED** that Women of the ELCA participants be encouraged to join the new ELCA World Hunger social network to connect and communicate with like-minded people.

...tools, seeds, and livestock.

**Health care** > Hospitals, clinics, and community health programs provide medical care and fight epidemic diseases of poverty such as water-borne illnesses, malaria, and HIV, and AIDS.

**Water** > Water projects provide clean, safe water for drinking, washing, and irrigation.

**Education and training** > Children, youth, and adults receive education and training to make long-term, positive changes in their lives.

**Peace and human rights** > Communities learn ways to overcome suffering caused by war, racism, and other forms of oppression.

### **Education**

Part of the calling of ELCA World Hunger is to tell the stories of our brothers and sisters who live in poverty around the world and close to home. ELCA World Hunger engages members of the ELCA, including children and youth, in learning about hunger and how our daily choices can make a difference.

### **Advocacy**

Government and elected officials have an important role in addressing hunger and poverty. By speaking with and on behalf of those who are hungry, ELCA World Hunger works to change the systems that

perpetuate hunger while equipping and encouraging members of the ELCA to do the same.

### **WHERE ELCA WORLD HUNGER FUNDS COME FROM**

ELCA World Hunger is funded entirely by donations—whether given directly, through Women of the ELCA, through the congregation or synod, or by bequest. Your regular Sunday offering does not benefit ELCA World Hunger. No government or corporate grants benefit the work of ELCA World Hunger. A small percentage of funding comes from employers' matching gifts or from family foundations.

## HOW YOUR GIFTS ARE USED

Every cent you give provides support for the church's hunger ministry. More than 90 cents of each dollar directly supports program work; less than a dime goes for administration and fundraising.

Gifts to ELCA World Hunger are directed through trusted partners with longstanding ties in the communities in which they work.

International partners include Lutheran World Relief (nearly one-third of our international relief and development funding is directed through LWR), The Lutheran World Federation, Church World Service (CROP Walk), and global companion churches.

Domestically, ELCA World Hunger funds are directed through Bread for the World, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services, and many other anti-hunger organizations. The Domestic Hunger Grants program works with synods throughout the church to award hundreds of grants each year to organizations and programs that fight hunger in almost every state.

## VOLUNTEERS AND VALUE

Our church's hunger ministry has a far greater effect than the financial figures at right would seem to suggest. Much of the work of ELCA World Hunger is carried out by volunteers. Every synod and most congregations in our church are

blessed by the energy and dedication of volunteer hunger leaders and committees.

These volunteer hunger leaders and committees are not only essential to the work of ELCA World Hunger, but they are also your link to ELCA World Hunger. If you need to find out who your synodical hunger leaders are, you can contact the office of your synod or the office of ELCA World Hunger (email [hunger@elca.org](mailto:hunger@elca.org) or call 800-638-3522).

Your hunger leaders will be delighted to hear from you. You might ask your hunger leader to speak to your group about ways to be involved with ELCA World Hunger. What a great idea for a forum or program!

Speaking of programs, ELCA World Hunger makes available many free resources that you can use to raise awareness of global hunger in your unit and congregation. Customizable Toolkits are available for download at [www.elca.org/hunger/toolkits](http://www.elca.org/hunger/toolkits). Browse the [www.elca.org/hunger](http://www.elca.org/hunger) Web site for many more useful and informative resources.

## YOU MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN SOMEONE'S LIFE

When you get involved with ELCA World Hunger, whether by volunteering to serve, sending a donation, or helping people learn about hunger in our world today, you make a

difference in someone's life.

That someone might be a woman in Uganda who now has access to clean water, or a schoolboy in Appalachia bringing home a backpack full of nutritious food for the weekend.

That someone might be a confirmand in your own congregation whose eyes are opened to the gospel call to love and serve our neighbor.

That someone whose life is changed might even be you.

## ELCA WORLD HUNGER FACTS AND FIGURES 2010

We all know the power of a committed, dedicated woman. Can you imagine what amazing things will happen when thousands of committed, dedicated women throughout the church turn their hearts and minds and hands to the problem of hunger in our world by supporting the work of ELCA World Hunger?

Advent is a time of joyful, hopeful waiting. I can't wait to see what wonderful things Women of the ELCA will bring about in their partnership with ELCA World Hunger. 🌿

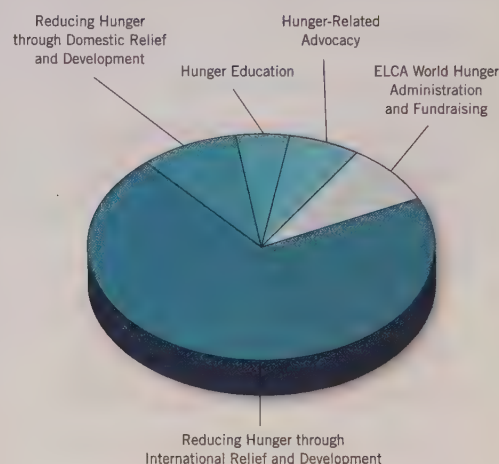
**Audrey Novak Riley**, formerly associate editor for this magazine, now serves the church as assistant director for ELCA World Hunger.





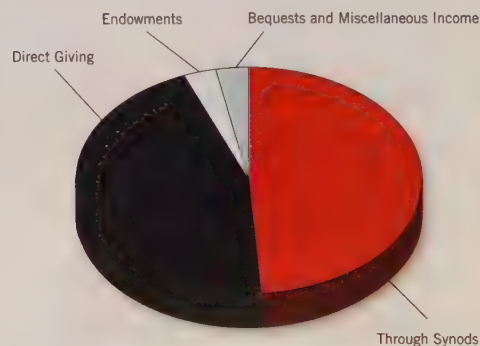
## 2010 Expenditures: \$18,325,600

Reducing Hunger through International Relief and Development	70.7%	\$12,961,440
Reducing Hunger through Domestic Relief and Development	9%	\$1,646,788
Hunger Education	5.2%	\$946,890
Hunger-Related Advocacy	6.5%	\$1,184,649
ELCA World Hunger Administration and Fundraising	8.6%	\$1,575,834
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>\$18,325,600</b>



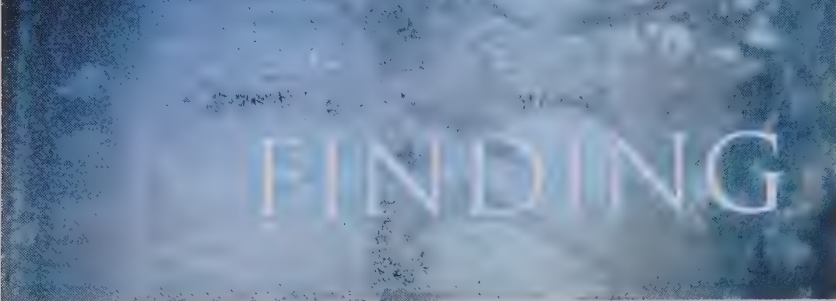
## 2010 Income: \$17,714,121

Through Congregations and Synods	49%	\$8,643,721
Direct Giving	45%	\$7,937,349
Endowments	3%	\$577,320
Bequests and Miscellaneous Income	3%	\$555,731
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>\$17,714,121</b>



## HOW TO GIVE TO ELCA WORLD HUNGER

When you give to ELCA World Hunger through Women of the ELCA, you support both ministries. Simply make out your check to Women of the ELCA and write "ELCA World Hunger" on the memo line. Mail it to Women of the ELCA, P.O. Box 71764, Chicago IL 60694-1764.



FINDING

# WARMTH

by Debra Madaris Efird

"Do you know what degree it is?"

That was the response of the blanket-shrouded woman on the air mattress beside mine when I whispered "good morning" to her.

I told her I didn't know and she'd grunted her disapproval. It was 4:45 a.m. and I hadn't yet ventured from my warm cocoon. Even in that mind-fogging early hour, I wondered why it mattered to her what degree it was. Of course it was cold, cold, and nothing but cold outside. There was still snow on the ground. Why would she ask?

It had been a night of fitful sleep, and I wasn't in the best of moods. Deep, strangled coughing joined the growls of snoring, both resonating periodically in the cavernous gym. The sporadic loud click of the restroom doors and the thunderous echo of the heat restarting every half hour pierced the dark night over and over again. The muffled footsteps of the sleepless, perhaps trying to pace through nicotine urges in the nonsmoking environment, further interrupted my dozing attempts. Amidst the total cacophony of unfamiliar night sounds, my rest had suffered greatly.

One night a week during the winter months my church, Advent Lutheran, Charlotte, N.C., provides shelter for up to 14 homeless guests (men, women, and, yes, sometimes children) through a local Room in the Inn program. Each guest is served a warm dinner and breakfast and given a bag lunch. Church members of all ages participate in the many tasks involved: transporting the guests, providing the three meals and small treat bags, setting up the beds, taking soiled linens to nearby hotels for laundering, sleeping over, and cleaning up afterwards.

## Into a cold day

As the timed lights slowly came up in the gym, the 14 strangers roused from their warm stations about the room. I couldn't turn my eyes away from their deliberations in the dimness. One sleepy-eyed woman fished through a large flowered tote bag, pulling out two different sweaters which she held up, as if comparing their weight. Two older men with craggy, lined faces sat on their mattresses a mere three feet apart, conferring about whether or not to put on a second pair of socks. Both did. A young pregnant woman stretched her arms heavenward and then slipped a large gray sweatshirt over her thermal shirt. Even after tugging on it, the sweatshirt wasn't quite long enough to cover her baby bump. She shrugged and rubbed the lower part of her belly, as if assuring the unborn child she'd keep it warm as best she could.

I thought about my closet crammed full of clothes, not necessarily stylish, but certainly clean and well-fitting. I pondered the way I carefully layered my clothing to deal with the varying temperature of my workplace, which ranged from chilly to cozy, depending on whim, as it seemed. I realized that what degree it was *did* matter, especially to someone who would spend a large portion of the day weathering the elements. A morning with a 18-degree reading on the thermometer required additional layers.

I followed my bedside neighbor into the restroom and set my small makeup bag on the shelf above the second sink. I opened it and surveyed the many items comprising my daily beauty routine.

My neighbor was splashing her face with cold water to help her awaken to another questionable day. Once



deposited downtown, where would she go during the early morning hours before the Urban Ministry Center opened? What if she needed to go to the bathroom? Would she be safe today? What if, due to some unforeseen event, she arrived at the shelter too late to be processed for the night? What if there was no room in the inn?

A sideways glance showed her discreetly applying lip balm to her cracked lips. I zipped my makeup bag shut, suddenly conscious of my vanity in imagining that makeup would matter in this setting. So I simply washed my face and left it bare, matching the sensible style of another woman.

She stared into the mirror for a moment, perfectly still, perhaps pondering at the reflection of the homeless person she'd become. How had it come to this?

I wanted to tell her that I was sorry that I didn't know what degree it was, that I wished I had checked the weather forecast before we went abroad. But I didn't think anything should say would ease her day, so I remained respectfully silent. Though we'd slept an arm's length away from each other, our worlds were light years apart.

She grunted as she turned away. Then she scrambled out ahead of me to gulp down the hot breakfast that church members had donated. A few minutes later the guests began

loading into the vans to return downtown. To the cold streets.

### The gift of going home

I cringed at the unfairness of it all. They weren't just homeless people. They were my sisters and brothers in Christ. Our lives had converged as we shared a moment in time, even though the new day highlighted the different paths we follow.

In silence I worked with another volunteer as we folded blankets and bagged used linens. While he stacked the now flat air mattresses, I swept the huge gym floor. We left the building pristine, with no evidence of the life dramas from the night before.

For 10 years, Advent Lutheran has cared for these guests in our church through the program run by the local Urban Ministry Center.

As the years have rolled by, we have hosted Room in the Inn on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. Every effort was made to ensure the guests experienced a meaningful

visit, including inviting them to the special evening worship services. Candlelit tables, holiday foods, and even a visit from Santa Claus helped provide a warm, caring experience. Every volunteer there left filled with the richness of Christmas spirit, treasuring the simple taken-for-granted gift of going home.

That morning, I drove home through the breaking sunrise, thinking my house looked especially beautiful with diamond-studded snow still draping the roof and yard. It would be toasty inside where I'd slip into a comfortable bed with flannel sheets and nothing but a cat to disturb me. I'd recover my sleep in absolute warmth, but forever changed. ❁

**Debra Madaris Efird**, a lifelong Lutheran, is a school counselor and freelance writer who is a member of the North Carolina Writers' Network. Her book entitled *Groups in Practice: A School Counselor's Collection* will be published by Taylor & Francis (Routledge) in April 2012.

The ELCA released a message about the Christian response to homelessness in 1990 that is still relevant today. You can find it at [www.elca.org/socialissues](http://www.elca.org/socialissues). Scroll down to social messages.

Last summer, as part of its triennial gathering, the Women of the ELCA presented Spokane-area organizations with hundreds of in-kind gifts intended to support women and children living with homelessness, in transition, or who have been victims of violence. The gifts included school kits, clothing, quilts and 11,160 minutes of phone cards and \$10,420 in gift cards.



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## GRACE NOTES

### Faithful Anna

Linda Post Bushkofsky



## You know who they are.

They are the matriarchs. They have been around forever. They know where every spoon is stored. They know how to iron the fair linen and polish the chalice. They have given their lives over to the church, praying and serving God. Perhaps you are even one of them, a matriarch.

The widow Anna, who appears in St. Luke's account of Christ's birth, was one of them. Anna was a prophetess and she spent all her time at the temple, fasting and praying. Had there been an altar guild there, Anna would have chaired it. If the temple had a kitchen committee, she would have been on it. The temple was her life.

Unlike Simeon, who also features in this story, Anna is not ready to die. She may embody holy aging but she's still very much alive as she comes upon Mary, Joseph, the baby Jesus, and Simeon gathered in the temple. Anna sees Simeon take the baby in his arms and praise God with the familiar words, "Lord, now let your servant go in peace, your word has been fulfilled..."

Drawing on her faithful experiences and rich past, Anna recognizes that a new era is breaking forth, a new reality has arrived. The baby Jesus is ushering in a new world order, the order that Mary sang about when she learned she was carrying the Christ child.

Anna sees Jesus and begins immediately telling everyone about the Messiah. While Mary was still pondering things in her heart and Simeon was ready to die, Anna begins proclaiming the good news

to all she encounters. Anna's not ready to die, she's got some proclaiming to do!

Anna embodies the meaning of her name, that is, *grace*. She approaches her advanced years with strength. Having lived a life of service, the disciple Anna gracefully steps back as the new world order is heralded in Jesus' birth, pointing to a future filled with God's promises. She is satisfied to tell about the transforming love of God in Jesus, the Messiah. Given her age and role as a prophet, Anna's proclamation is given credence even though she is neither famous nor powerful.

It seems to me that Anna offers some lessons for the matriarchs of Women of the ELCA. You who have led full and faithful lives of service, might it be time to gracefully make room as a new future breaks forth for the organization? Is it a time to allow new ideas and new leaders to blossom? Like Anna, could you draw on your deep reservoir of faith to joyfully share the good news of what younger women are doing in Women of the ELCA?

Anna was not ready to give up because she had some proclaiming to do. She joyfully and contentedly approached the next stage of her life of service. I am by no means asking our matriarchs to give up. I am asking our matriarchs to consider how they might approach their advanced years with strength and style, supporting younger generations as they mobilize women to act boldly on their faith in Jesus Christ. ☸

Linda Post Bushkofsky is executive director of Women of the ELCA.





AMEN!

## Stepping Out

by Catherine Malotky

When my forebears moved away from the homes their families had inhabited for generations, they abandoned the familiar. Most of them were seeking opportunity. One came to be a Swedish maid in Chicago, but ended up marrying and raising a family. Two left behind a step-mother and a crowded house in the German countryside and landed in upper Midwest farm country that looked a lot like the rolling hills of home. Many of us have stories about those who preceded us in the family tree.

For them, survival was the focus. Finding work took most of their energy. I suspect they did not anticipate what it would mean to create community here. At first, they stuck together with people like themselves. Everyone in their communities tended to speak the same language and they worshipped together. For a good long time, they did not need to think about diversity.

Now, four (or more) generations into this experiment, the lines between us are blurring more every day. Though we may talk about what valley in Norway your people came from, the Swedes and the Norwegians, the Danes and the Germans, the Liberians and Hmong, the Somalis and Iraqis, the Salvadorans and the Brazilians, all are a part of the fabric of our communities. No place is too remote; no community too exclusive.

Our diversity goes well beyond the country that originally housed our DNA. Now we know that race, from a genetic point of view, is a minor distinction.

The variations we can see with our eyes are barely noticeable differences in our genomes—mostly we are all the same.

The other things that have traditionally kept us apart—religion and politics—continue to trouble us. We can get awfully zealous in both of these arenas. But “my way or the highway” is not a helpful mantra for a healthy community. And we are, whether we like it or not, a community that is getting more global all the time.

Jesus, you ventured out beyond the boundaries of your religious and ethnic world. You dared to engage with people not like you, to bless (loaves and fishes) and to learn (remember that Syrophenician woman). Of course, not everyone agreed with you, or you with them. And we know that you paid dearly for the judgment others made about your ministry. We also believe that your resurrection was God’s response to your death and in this is our hope.

This season, we remember your birth, the beginning of your journey. You have been such a gift to us, dear Jesus. In you we see courage to stretch ourselves into our world, to be carriers of God’s love and welcome, to be hands of justice and mercy. In you we see generosity of spirit and a willingness to engage rather than exclude. In you we see God, loving us, welcoming us, inspiring us. Alleluia. Amen. 🌿

**The Rev. Catherine Malotky**, an ELCA pastor, serves at Luther Seminary as a philanthropy adviser. She has served as a parish pastor, editor, teacher, and retreat leader.



# DWA CHURCH COLLECTS THE GOOD BOOK

her 90<sup>th</sup> birthday in March, Arlynn O'Connor of St. John's Lutheran Church, Sioux City, Iowa, set a goal to collect 100 Bibles from her congregation. By Memorial Day, she had collected 126, so she upped her goal to 130, and scrounged around local thrift shops to find the extra four Bibles. "This was something our church had never done and everybody got involved," Arlynn said. People helped her pack the Bibles and mail them. "It was a blessing to work on."

The Lutheran Daughters of the Reformation Circle at St. John's collected \$95.12 to send the 198 pounds of Bibles to the Bible Foundation in Newberg, Ore., where they will be distributed to hospitals, nursing homes, inner-city churches and ministries, rescue missions, and more.

—Submitted by Arlynn O'Connor



Carol Hudson (left) delivering the first Bibles to Arlynn O'Connor

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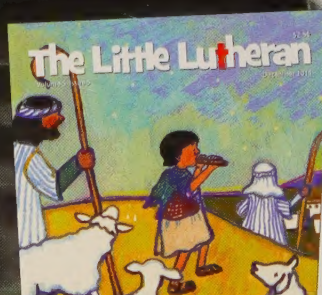
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In 1965, on a train from New York City to Hoboken, N.J., Pastor Malvin Lundeen, secretary of the former Lutheran Church in America, led riders in singing carols.

